A TELL-TALE LETTER--HOW A HUSBAND WAS TAUGHT NOT TO JUMP AT CONCLUSIONS

HARRY NEVILLE and his wife had lived one happy year of married life. They had their little differences, of course, odd little corners had to be smoothed off. Both were somewhat impulsive, sensitive, and quick-tempered, but the magic of love, combined with common sense, had helped him, and he was increasingly thankful that he had met, and wooed and won her; while she was proud of her strong, manly husband, who, for her sake, had altered so much of life, and, except for a rare visit to his old club, or once or twice playing in his old football team, had settled down to home, to find all his happiness in it and the society of his bright young wife.

They had known little of each other before marriage. He had met her at some friend's with whom she was staying in London. He had heard how she, after enjoying the comforts of easy circumstances, and after she had just finished her college course, had been thrown on the world to seek a livelihood on the sudden death of her father, when it was found that he was so deeply involved that there was nothing left for his only child but a good education, strong will and health.

Harry, from their first meeting, had fallen desperately in love, and holding a fair position in a city firm, had soon persuaded her to share with him the comfortable suburban home where they had so happily passed the first year of their married life.

And then suddenly, without warning, came the rude shock, and the dark cloud and storm.

On Thursday morning, while breakfasting somewhat hurriedly, for he had been spending the previous evening with some old club friends, and had risen late, Harry said:

"I am sorry to play truant so much, darling, not seeing you all day yesterday, and now I want you to spare me again this evening, and after that I will be a good boy and stay at home."

"Why, you gadabout!" she answered. "Where are you going tonight?"

"Well," he replied, "Jim Thornton, an old friend of mine, is going abroad to a good appointment he has secured, and came round to the office yesterday to ask me to dine with him and some other fellows at 'The Holborn' tonight. I do not think I will be very late, but as I am rather busy, and do not wish to leave the office early I think I will take with me what I want and change there. Put up my things, dear, and I will make up for leaving you so much by being extra good. You know where I am most happy, but I cannot break off all old friendships at once!"

"And I do not want you to," she answered. "You devote too much time to me now, and I sometimes fear lest you should tire of so much woman's society—I love to have you with me, but I want you still to mix with men. It must be better for you sometimes."

She ran off and soon came back with a small bag containing what he required, bade him a warm good-by and he went off, as happy a man as entered the city that day.

By one of those strange chances which, unimportant as they may seem at first, are pregnant with vast issues, he found it necessary during the day to make an appointment for late in the afternoon, which brought him very near home, and so he altered his plan of dressing at the office and resolved to give his wife a pleasant surprise; spending an hour at home, and going thence to keep his evening engagement.

He let himself in with a smile as he pictured her surprise, and going though the hall, found her in the little room opposite the dining room, which they used as library, smoking, writing and reading room—in fact, a snug little place where rigid order was not enforced, and where, either together or separately, they had passed many contended hours.

Coming in suddenly upon her, she started, and, as he thought, with a look of some disappointment, said:

"You told me you were not coming home till late."

He went over to her and kissed her, when he noticed a letter which, after writing, she had apparently let fall to the floor by the writing table.

Stooping to pick it up, he said, laughing:

"Going to resign, and looking for another place?"

She colored, and hastily made for the letter, saying:

"Oh, it is only a spoilt letter which I rewrote this morning. I meant to have torn it up."

But he had already picked it up, and without any intention of reading it, had caught sight of its first words and suddenly grew stern.

"Give it to me," she cried, as he held it from her with one hand, while with the other he pushed her almost rudely away. Then, glancing at the letter, he uttered an oath, thrust her down into a chair and exclaimed:

"You false-hearted Jezebel!"

"Harry, how dare you! What do you mean?"

"Silence!" he said, pressing his hand heavily on her and holding her fixed, and she, for the moment terrified, remained quiet while he read the letter, which ran:

"My dearest George: I cannot tell you how I felt since, after three years, we so unexpectedly met yesterday, and I feel how great a wrong I did you in leaving you without knowledge of my movements, and to suppose I was indifferent. But after yesterday's meeting, when you put your arm round me with the old tenderness and forgave my folly, all the old feeling has come back, or rather revived, for really it never left my heart, which poured itself out to you so freely in the dear old days, and I love you still more since you tell me you have never loved me less than then.

"But I cannot write all I want to say, and am sending this rather that we may take advantage of a grand opportunity which has unexpectedly presented itself for us to have an hour or two quite alone.

"My husband this morning told me of an engagement which keeps him in town till late, probably 11 o'clock tonight, so you may contrive to come to me about 7 o'clock (what a pity you are engaged all day).

"Our interview yesterday was all too short. I am longing to have you with me, to lay my head on you in the old way, and tell you all my thoughts, and show you that you hold the same place ever in the hearts of your loving

"ITTY."

For a moment after reading this he remained silent, then, turning with an expression of terrible sternness to his wife, he said:

"Do you say that this was rewritten and posted?"

"Yes, I do," she answered, "and how dare you speak to me like this? I can do as I like, I suppose. I am not your slave, to answer for every act to you!"

Not noticing her last words, he demanded:

"Will this appointment be kept?"

"Yes, it will, and I shall do just as I please in the matter," was her angry reply.

"You brazen face! Tell me at once the fellow's surname and address," said he.

"Fellow! Fellow!" she exclaimed scornfully—then suddenly stopping, she looked fixedly at him for a moment as though deciding what course to take. A resolute expression came to her eyes, and angrily stamping her foot, she said:

"Find out all you want to know for yourself. Take your hand away, unless you are coward enough to strike me. I might, had you spoken differently, have spared you a part of the pain you shall feel now. But you can do your worst, and I will see that you and you only shall suffer." He released her, and she rose, and was about to leave the room, when he interposed, and controlling himself by a great effort, spoke again:

"You are utterly shameless; fool that I have been. If I am not coward enough as you call it, to strike you, be sure of this—the cad to whom your letter is addressed shall take the punishment for both, and will be in no condition to receive or respond to your brazen confessions."

To this she responded with a curl of the lip, and a scornful laugh which only maddened him. But he said nothing further—only took her firmly by the arm and led her into the dining room, placed her at the end farthest from the door, pushed the table to the same end of the room in front of her. She made no resistance, and did not speak—contenting herself with looking angrily at him as he sat her down, and putting on a look of sneering defiance.

He rang the bell, and as the maid responded, went to the room door to screen the view of her mistress, and said:

"A visitor will call shortly, about 7 o'clock, whom you are to show straight into this room, and to whom on no account you are to say I am at home. Mind you, do exactly as I have told you." The girl, half frightened at the stern mood of her usually good-tempered master, withdrew. He then stepped into the hall and returned with a heavy riding whip (an old treasure of his boyhood, which had been given him by a farmer uncle when staying in the country). Throwing this on a chair he looked at his watch and sat down.

Then she spoke, passionately, disdainfully, as though determined to goad him to the very utmost.

"You brave man, armed. Let me give you warning. You think to make me suffer in seeing, and another suffer in bearing your vengeance. Do not be too sure. Strong men have met defeat, and" (raising her voice) "so will you. In less than half an hour you will be cowed, humbled, and, as sure as I am here, you shall be thoroughly punished."

Such unabashed defiance, such absence of all compunction, and evident desire, that not content with the wrong he suffered, she should have him still further outraged—this was unbearable. He started forward, and for a moment it seemed he would strike her. Then her face changed, and she looked him straight in the eyes, with a glance which while he looked, seemed to disarm him, and she said as her voice seemed for the first time to betray something of fear:

"Harry, would you strike me?"

His hand dropped down again, and for ten minutes he sat buried in deep thought. It is wonderful how in the great crises of life, thoughts shape themselves so rapidly, and present so vividly, in so brief a space of time, the events of the past and the possibilities of the future. As the past months were lived again in those brief moments, even he himself was surprised to realize how his first anger turned to yearning love. As the memories came back of the tender glances of those beautiful eyes, which had just looked into his, of sweet endearing words, and tender caresses; of the devoted kindred soul (as he had thought) which looked through those soft eyes, to meet and mingle with his own. Then notwithstanding her unabashed and defiant attiture, and the terrible disillusionment which had come—so far as she was concerned—his anger was lost in grief, and thoughts of vengeance lost in care for her.

At last he rose, and seeing that he had but a few minutes probably at his disposal, said:

"Kate, after you leave this room tonight we meet no more. There are two courses open to you. Go to your aunt, if it can be arranged; or if you prefer it, take this house and its contents and have with you some middle-aged lady companion. My salary shall be equally divided between us so long as you give me no further reason to alter the arrangement, and on the express condition that you never willingly see again the—the—person you will see here shortly. Let me have your decision by letter in the morning, and if you decide to remain here, I shall leave for good.

"If at any time you need protection or any help, write to me at the office, and so far as I can render it you shall have it. Although it has all proved a delusion, and my earthly heaven a fool's paradise, I cannot forget it, and for the sake of the fair dream, although it turns out but a dream, you shall not want a friend."

"You are exceedingly kind," she said. "But these are matters we can discuss later on when you are less lordly, and in a far humbler state of mind, as most certainly you will be before this is finished."

Her sneering tone again aroused his fury. To feel that she had not only so deeply injured him, but gloried in the hope that he would be cowed, perhaps beaten by her unknown lover—made him conscious of a burning desire to strangle the very life out of the man he hoped soon to have in his grip.

At that moment the visitor's bell rang, and they heard the maid answer it. Starting up, he grasped the riding-whip and threw himself behind the door, just as it was swung open, and the maid announced:

"Miss Georgia Foster."

And there came into the room a tall, lovely woman, evidently some two or three years his wife's senior—to whom his wife, pushing back the table from her, flew with outstretched arms, crying:

"George, darling, I am so glad you have come. Finding you were coming, my husband here insisted on running home just to wait for an introduction to my dearest friend, and helpful confidante of the old time, of whom through my folly I had so long lost sight.

"Harry, this is my dear friend Georgina Foster, or George, as I always call her, who used to be sister and mother all in one to me, and whom I met yesterday. She has come to live very near us and, as you know, is going to spend the evening with me, so hurry up, and leave us quickly. For I have so much to tell her."

He came forward dropping the whip behind him, whispering to himself "idiot," "fool," and, with the best grace he could, stammered some commonplaces. Then, as a great wave of gladness came into his heart he turned to his wife and began:

"Kitty."

But she turned on him sharply, and bade him make haste, or he would be late for his engagement—adding, "I have so much to say to George, whom I only saw for a little while yesterday, and to whom I want to tell all our doings right up to date."

"But, Kitty"—and his eyes pleaded for compassion——

"Come! Hurry up," she said lightly, and with a smile; but when, as she pushed him out of the room, her back was to her friend she answered the appealing glance he gave her with a look of stern anger, and waving him off, closed the door upon him.

After dressing, during which operation he communed with himself, using expressions which it would have been anything but safe for others to use to him, he went out. But pausing for a moment at the door of the drawing room, he heard the merry laughter of two women who seemed to be enjoying it with infinite relish.

It took him some time, and much persuasion next day, to obtain forgiveness, which, however, was really waiting behind the little storm he had to bear, in a heart which beat with truest love for him, and which had, on reviewing the circumstances, found excuse for his mistake, and was not ill-pleased with him.

THE SEABOROUOH MYSTERY.

"YOU will always love me, Dick?"

"Till my death, Flossie!"

The unpleasant memory of those words came to Richard Filby as he sat on the cliffs a mile away from the little village of Seaborough painting, or rather attempting to paint. What a fool he had been! He had flirted disgracefully with the innkeeper's daughter, Flossie, who had seemingly taken all his attentions in earnest, perfectly unaware that there was another young woman up in London to whom he was engaged. Last evening they had walked out together as usual, wending their way along the shore, and there the declaration of love recorded above had been made. How on earth was he to get out of this imbroglio?

After a few minutes Filby dropped palette and brushes. Ambitious as he was to be famous, he really could not paint this morning. He slipped off his camp stool and, throwing himself full length on the grass, gazed up reflectively into the sky. What a nuisance this artistic temperament was! He was finally betrothed to Freda Withers at Forest Hill, and had no desire to end the betrothal, and yet down here in this romantic little spot the temptation to enjoy himself with Flossie Barnett, who had attracted him the very first moment that he arrived at the inn, had proved too strong to be resisted. It was an innocent entanglement, but how great the cost! He had come down to work and he had been philandering instead. And now the last day but one of his stay had come. What follies were committed in the name of so-called love!

"Nice day, sir!"

Filby looked up. It was the coastguard on his round.

"Yes! Rather warm for working, though, and for walking, too, I should imagine."

"Oh, I don't mind that, sir. Used to it, you see. That's a grand bit of cliff you're painting, sir."

"If I could only get it right it would be."

The coastguard mused, his hand stroking his chin, his eyes taking in the points of the picture.

"Ah, I mind that spot well. There was a suicide from there about a year back. A chap (he was the son of a farmer round here) as was gone on a girl that he couldn't get jumped right off there into the sea. His coat was found on the cliff—he'd taken it off before he jumped—but his body must have been washed away by the sea, for though we searched high and low, we never found it. It was a sad case."

"Very. I didn't know events like that occurred in this part."

"Sometimes, sir. Folks do silly things for love all the world over. Well, I must be moving on."

"Have a bit of tobacco?"

"Thank ye, sir. That's real stuff. Good morning."

Directly the man had passed on Filby began pacing up and down on the cliff. An idea had come, the execution of which might solve the difficulty he was in, and with free movement of his limbs, Filby always thought better. The notion presented difficulties at first, but one by one he saw his way out of them. What a lucky thing to have had that conversation with the coastguard! The means of relief from all his troubles was at hand.

That night an unusual thing occurred at the Seaborough Inn. Unseen by anyone, a man stole out at midnight, holding some dark objects under his arm, and made straight for the edge of the cliffs. Not a soul was about; only the distant sighing of the waves broke the stillness. Hour after hour passed by, yet the man did not return. But the wind rose, the sighing of the sea became a tumultuous roar, and by the time the light broke a regular tempest was in progress.

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Two hours prior to that mysterious midnight flight Flossie Barnett sat in her bedroom, her usually smiling face most seriously set. A letter on foreign note paper and bearing the Cape Town postmark was in her hands and she had committed the contents to memory for about the tenth time. It was from her soldier-lover, Jack Preston, written a couple of days before he was to embark on the transport for England. In a very short while the writer would be here in person, with the plainly stated object of claiming her as his bride.

Now Flossie was in a quandary. Her little flirtation with their visitor, Mr. Filby, had taken a far more serious turn than she had anticipated. She had merely intended to amuse herself with him during the absence of her real lover, and surely a girl left by herself for two whole years had liberty to seek some mild amusement. On a higher social level than herself he had treated her as an equal, and that had rather turned her head. Besides, a halo of romance encircled his ample locks—he was an artist; in a few short years he would write R. A. after his name, and have the free right of hanging mediocre pictures on the Academy walls. In a confidential moment Filby had drawn for her this vision of the future, of course omitting any allusion to mediocrity.

Yes, the affair had gone much farther than Flossie intended. As a matter of fact, she was enjoying herself so hugely that she had not the strength of will to draw back before the mischief was done. Last night she had been drawn into a horrible lie. She had told him that she loved him, while all the time her heart was with her old lover abroad. And this morning had brought a letter from him, a letter whose every line sat in judgment upon her and rebuked her for her folly.

She recalled Mr. Filby's manner and look of the previous evening. How dreadfully solemn he had looked—and yet how finely picturesque! She had certainly made a splendid conquest, and if his heart was won but to be broken afterward, still her achievement would provide food for her vanity for years.

Leaving that side of the question, however, Flossie turned to the consideration of the more practical matter—what was to be done now? Mr. Filby must be informed, and that speedily, of Jack Preston's existence, but how could the information be most delicately conveyed? A personal interview would be most satisfactory, but Flossie shrank from cutting a poor figure at that. What would be the gentlest way of letting this artist lover down?

Ah, she had it! Mr. Filby was returning to town on the morrow. She had his London address, and would write there a letter, which would reach him soon after his arrival home, explaining as best she might her previous commitment to another. It was an easy and capital solution of the difficulty.

The plan was no sooner settled than put into effect. Flossie took from a drawer paper and pen, and after a little cogitation fashioned the epistle. She read it through, approved, sealed and stamped the envelope. She would run out and post it herself the first thing in the morning.

Her mind at ease, Flossie got into bed and was soon asleep. Had she only remained awake a little longer, she would have heard the stairs creak under passing footsteps, and the old inn door squeak as it was being stealthily closed.

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Directly she was up next morning Flossie went out and posted her letter. A blustering gale was raging and the wind lashed fiercely in her face, but her mission was far too important to admit of delay. On returning to the inn she ran in the passage into the arms of Bell the barman.

"Oh, miss, I was looking for you everywhere! There's someone in the parlor as wants to see you most particular."

"Who, Bell?"

"A sailor man I should reckon by his rig-out. He seems most excited."

Wondering who her visitor could be at this early hour, Flossie turned the handle of the parlor door. A man whom she recognized as one of the local coastguards rose and touched his forehead.

"Beg pardon for disturbing you so early, miss, but I've some very bad news. There's been, I'm afraid, another case of suicide from the Seaborough cliff."

"Who?" queried Flossie, turning pale.

"A gent as I've had one or two chats with of late. I don't know his name, but he was stopping here he told me. One of those painter chaps."

"Mr. Filby? You can't mean it. You must be mistaken." A wild look came into the girl's eyes.

"Don't think I am. Perhaps you recognize these articles."

Going to the back of the chair upon which he had been sitting, the man picked up some objects from the ground. They were a man's coat and waistcoat of a rather pronounced check. Startled recognition stood in Flossie's face.

"Ah, I see you know them, miss. They're the very clothes—a little stained with paint, you see—that that artist fellow was wearing yesterday. But that's not all. When I found those on the cliff, I turned them over, and there, pinned to the inside pocket was this envelope. I'm not much of a scholar, but I think it's addressed to you, miss."

Flossie took the note with trembling fingers, and, finding herself unable to stand any longer, subsided into a chair. She guessed the contents. Mad with love for her, Dick Filby must have committed suicide. At last she got the envelope open, and the few brief lines within confirmed her worst fears.

"Dearest Flossie," it ran. "Forgive me the step I have taken—believe me, it was the only one. We loved one another too passionately to be happy apart for a single moment and there was a life between that would always have divided us. I cannot explain but, dearest, I could never have lived without you, so I have chosen what they say is the pleasantest method of departing from existence. Treasure the lovely time we had together. Your broken-hearted

"DICK."

"I should like you to keep the one painting I did at Seaborough as a souvenir."

Flossie read it through twice, and at last the sense began to beat in upon her brain. She had driven the man who loved her into a watery grave.

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That same afternoon Richard Filby in the flesh arrived at his lodgings in West Kensington. He did not look like a man who had lately undergone a fatal experience. His cheeks were bronzed and his step was brisk—indeed, the first remark which his landlady made was to compliment him on his improved appearance.

Filby went upstairs and proceeded to unpack. The few articles left at the inn to allay suspicion could be replaced at a very small cost, while a breach of promise case might have landed him in hundreds.

He smiled as he thought of his clever and successful ruse.

He pictured the local constable assuming terrific importance, declining to give any information whatever, and all the inhabitants clustering in knots and discussing the news.

Now Filby was not a hard hearted man, and he felt just the least bit sorry as he thought of Flossie Barnett. She would naturally be much cut up, for she loved him tremendously—but there, she was a high spirited girl, and took life pretty easily. And then, of course, marriage between them had always been quite impossible.

Dinner was duly served, and Filby did the meal ample justice. Over his cigar he commenced to nod, and remembered that he had lost a night's rest. He would go to bed very early tonight.

A knock at the door. The maid entered with a letter. He looked at the envelope and started. It bore the Seaborough postmark. It was from Flossie Barnett. He was thoroughly roused now. Had his trick been discovered?

He tore the letter open feverishly. The date reassured him; it was written last night. What on earth had Flossie to say?

Three minutes later Filby was pacing the room, waving the letter irritably in the air. His scheme had gone for nothing; all his trouble had been wasted. This chit of a girl had been simply playing with his affections all the time, and here was her confession.

He seized pen and paper. That night the following communication was dropped into the post:

"Mr. Richard Filby begs to inform Miss Flossie Barnett that he is still alive and well, and has returned to town. On second consideration, he did not think Miss Barnett worth drowning for, and her letter to hand this evening confirms him in this opinion. Mr. Filby hopes that Miss Barnett will attain happiness in her projected union, and that his little picture may find a niche on her walls."

But by return of post without line or comment, Filby to his great indignation got his picture back disfigured almost beyond recognition.

NOEL CLAYTON'S CHRISTMAS.

NOEL CLAYTON was tall and gaunt, with clear, candid blue eyes, and his white hands small and nervous-looking, as well kept as those of a woman.

He was thirty, and a splash of gray on either temple, a strand or two of white in his mustache, made him look older.

He was broad-chested and muscular—by all rule he should have been a soldier—he looked an "open air" man, but for five years he had been writing short stories, novelettes, and serials for the weekly press.

It was good, nervous work. His name was becoming known, for he had the happy knack of blending pathos with humor. He had traveled widely, and an Australian bush idyll at the beginning of the week would be followed by a London society story, to be followed again by a story of rustic life in the dear West Country that he loved so well.

He lived quite alone, worked—and smoked—from morning to night, loved his profession, and had practically dropped all his friends—male and female—and when a fit of the not infrequent blues got him by the throat, threw his pen into the grate and ordered up his landlady's children, and pandemonium reigned for an hour.

Sometimes he gave them pennies, but not always—small coin of the realm is not always available to authors—but the romps were huge, and he enjoyed them.

Of course, there was a woman at the bottom of the tangle of the man's life, and women complicate things sometimes—he would have said "always."

On one particular evening he was alone and writing, when Jim Courtenay was shown in—and Jim was an old and tried friend—about the only friend the lonely, self-absorbed man had, and so the incomer sat down and lighted his pipe, and did not bother the author for quite a quarter of an hour, and then Noel rose and stretched himself.

"What is it this time, Noel?"

"Oh, the usual thing—love; and candidly, I am getting so sick of writing love stories."

"Ah! you feel like that?"

"Man alive, this is Christmas Eve, and and somehow—somehow—my thoughts went back with a jump, and I remembered one Christmas Eve when——"

"Your pipe's out, Noel!"

"Aye, so it is. Well there was one Christmas Eve——"

"My dear boy, are you worrying about her still?"

"Yes," and then a long pause.

It is the privilege of chums to sit silent for a spell.

"And all this happened four or five years ago. I never heard the rights or wrongs of the story."

Noel crossed the room, and, digging both hands into his pockets, looked at his chum.

"There is nothing to know. After the four happy years of married life trouble came between us, lies came between us; and—and—here I am and it's Christmas Eve. Of course, our baby was only a mite—a wee, blue-eyed, golden-haired mite; couldn't walk, crawled, you know; but we were awful chums, and when she went and took our mite—well," and the man's laugh hurt his own ears. "Well, then I took to writing love stories—love, old chap, with a happy ending—bishops, bridesmaids, bouquets and blessings, and"—his temporary excitement had left him—he added drily:

"And it pays! Now go, old chap. I must get my stuff done for the early post," and Chum went out while Noel turned again to his interrupted work.

Between each line on every page quaint turns of expression, quaint thoughts haunted him, a dead past spoke to him.

The girl-wife had been very sweet, very lovable, very beautiful—and had marred two lives.

There should be a special place of torment for the person who deliberately comes between two people who love each other and smilingly warps two lives.

Pearl Clayton was as easily led as a child, a soft, emotional weak little woman, and when Noel returned from a few days' holiday he found the house closed and Pearl and Baby had departed.

Noel drifted for a little bit, and the shock unmanned him terribly, but his pen was his sole source of income, and it had to be plied if body and soul were to be kept together, and in a very few weeks he had, to some extent, regained his mental balance, and his work improved.

The eve of Christmas and the day itself appeals to most hearts, and on this particular eve Noel kept thinking back and thinking back while he wrote.

How well he remembered the extra sized stocking he induced the nurse to knit, and how bulky it looked and felt on Christmas morning. And then came school, college, and then married life.

When the scribbling fit was on him Pearl used to draw her low wicker chair close to his writing-table, knitting, or daintily fingering white material, soft, and downy, and fluffy, for the prospective wearer, and the few remarks she made seemed to chime in and identify themselves with what he was writing; but, of course, all this happened five years ago.

One odd little trick Pearl had, and Noel remembered it this evening—and missed it.

When his pen was working extra busily she used to lay the tips of her fingers upon his right hand—just where hand meets wrist. She did not incommode him in the least. He declared her touch inspired him; they were such pink-tipped fingers, and so small, and he had often written with the tiny touch on his wrist almost unconsciously—only peeping up from time to time, at a sweet oval face, into deep violet eyes love lit.

But, of course, this was five years ago.

So he wrote on, feeling a little bit sorry that Chum had not stayed, for after all he only had another half hour's work before him, and then they could sit and chat, and perhaps drown the sound of the bells that he knew would ring out in a few hours.

He was just in the frame of mind to summon his landlady's children, but, except for himself, the house was empty. There was a Christmas Eve party going on, and Mrs. Marsh and her progeny were attending it.

He had been writing for half an hour since Chum had left him, and he felt the old familiar touch on his wrist. It was imagination, of course; he did not even turn his head, and then he was looking into blue eyes, in the round golden-curled framed face of a boy of four, who laughed up at him and presented a rosebud to be kissed.

"Goodness, child—where on earth do you come from, and who—who brought you? What is your name?"

"Eric," and the child began to make preparations for climbing a lofty knee.

"What brought you here, Baby Eric? How did you come?"

Noel felt like an Irish member of Parliament, for "no answer was given," but a wee form full of hugs and kisses got fast hold upon him, and said gravely, and yet with a sweet air of command:

"Just come'd—and now if you're not too busy, mister Father——"

"Yes, my son."

"P'raps—I'd better go to bed."

"But, my child—my little son—who brought you here? Where is your mother?" and the tall man, suddenly releasing his first-born, paced up and down. Of course, Chum had left the door open, and someone had told the child to walk straight in—and the child had—straight in.

The auther—his tiny son was on the floor now, saying things to the cat, and it deserved every word, being a cat that licks stamps off letters, and loves bacon and boiled eggs—thrust his hands deep into his pockets and looked down, sad-eyed, at little Sunny-face."

"Yes, perhaps you had better come to bed."

There were, of course, almost insurmountable difficulties in disrobing the youngster, but he was full of suggestions. Buttons, tape, and heaven knows what, were in turn wrestled with, and at last baby Eric was wrapped up in a smoking coat, and was asleep in a very few minutes. Noel resumed his work—peeping from time to time into the bedroom, light in hand, to see a sweet mouth that dimpled and curved. He kissed the child timidly, it might wake, perhaps cry; but the demeanor of Master Eric surprised the lonely man, for a sleepy arm found its way round his neck, a sleepy voice rehearsed the concluding sentence of the evening prayer, all he heard was "God bless father," and as he strode from the room his thoughts flew back and back.

If Chum would only come, if something would only happen to break the silence, a silence only cleft by the sigh of a child.

The church was only at the end of the street.

He could hear the bell-ringers shuffling along the frosty pavements, in a few minutes—and he bent to his work.

Half asleep, half awake, he was conscious of the old, almost forgotten touch upon his wrist—a dream, doubtless—but he could not shake it off, and then he looked down.

Kneeling as of yore beside him, blue eyes tear-dimmed, was Pearl.

"I have returned, Noel." It was a quavering little voice, but it thrilled him.

How like she was to their child.

And then the bells clashed forth their message, "Peace on Earth, Good Will toward Men," and to two hearts they carried a sweeter, deeper message still.

No word was spoken. A small figure in a smoking jacket that reached to his heels, stood at the dividing door, an eager face turned to either.

And husband and wife kissed silently.